**The Seeds Of Their Own Destruction (#1)**

Paradise once existed, so we’re told, in Eden, Arcadia or Shambhala. Paradise will again be ours in the afterlife if we reach Heaven, Valhalla or the Happy Hunting Grounds. Unfortunately, paradise in the present has always been elusive. Not for lack of trying. Utopian experiments have been attempted at every step in the march of civilization. Why haven’t any of them succeeded?

For one thing, the bar is constantly being raised. Life in a modest American town today would have been the envy of the Middle Ages. But such a community, with its technology, infrastructure or freedoms, could never have come into being in the Middle Ages; and if it somehow magically appeared, it would have promptly been sacked. For most of history, this raised a significant obstacle to utopia. Any land of milk and honey automatically attracted swords and muskets.

The New World changed that. Small groups could organize civilized communities based on any peculiar theory, with little concern for conquering hordes. All they had to do was be economically and socially viable. This new opportunity spawned a flood of utopian experiments, beginning with the first colonists.

Most schoolchildren know that the Mayflower pilgrims came to America to escape the persecution they encountered in Europe. A more obscure fact was that the Plymouth Colony was originally organized as a communal society, with an equal sharing of the fruits of everyone’s labor. At least, that was the plan. Their governor, William Bradford, documented how this degenerated over the next two years into “injustice,” “indignity” and “a kind of slavery.” Productivity was shot, and the community starved. Bradford wisely placed the blame not on the flaws of his people, but on the system their society had chosen. They abandoned communal ownership and, lo and behold, the fields sprouted with life. As Bradford writes:

“They had very good success, for it made all hands very industrious, so as much more corn was planted than otherwise would have been. The women now went willingly into the field, and took their little ones with them to set corn. … By this time harvest was come, and instead of famine, now God gave them plenty, and the faces of things were changed, to the rejoicing of the hearts of many.”

Hundreds of utopian experiments followed Plymouth–religious and secular, communist and individualistic, radical and moderate. But all had to make impossible sacrifices in the service of their ideals. The Shakers and Harmonists were very successful economically, and bound tightly in a common spirituality. However, their way of keeping a lid on worldly desires was to practice celibacy. Now, anyone who has raised children knows what a resource drain they can be, and would not be surprised that communities without offspring could get ahead financially. Nevertheless, the celibate life had only so much appeal, and these sects eventually died off.

Many religious societies declined or disbanded after the loss of their founder. Others, such as the Perfectionists of Oneida who practiced group marriage, or the entrepreneurial Inspirationists at Amana, eventually gave up communal living, spun off their commercial interests and began assimilating into the surrounding communities.

Secular societies fared even worse, many of them repeating the lessons of Plymouth. Josiah Warren, a member of the celebrated New Harmony commune that collapsed under collectivist strains, went on to found societies based on a decidedly more individualistic premise, including utopia in Ohio and Modern Times on Long Island. While economically successful, boundaries between the true believers and their neighbors dissolved over time. Today, the hamlet of Brentwood, N.Y., where Modern Times used to be, looks like the rest of its Long Island surroundings–pleasant enough, but no utopia.

The long series of failed experiments yields some interesting lessons. The first is that internal power grabs are even more poisonous to utopian dreams than external threats. The gold standard of utopian leadership, the benevolent prince or philosopher king, is inherently unstable. Solomon, Marcus Aurelius and Suleiman the Magnificent failed utterly to provide successors with anything like their talents.

The competition for succession invariably favors not the wise, but the ruthless. This is especially dangerous in communistic societies. Where selfishness is a sin or a crime, everyone is guilty; you don’t want your antagonists gaining the authority to sit in judgment. Democracy provides a more stable succession mechanism, but it is inherently factionalist. Even in Mormon Utah, a utopian experiment that fared better than most, there are factions out of power who are unhappy with things.

A second lesson is that ideals are constraints, and the more constraints one tries to impose, the less viable the community will be. It’s hard enough for a private company–an organization focused *exclusively* on economic success–to survive intact for multiple generations. Add to that special utopian claims on the firm by the employees and you can see how tough the odds are. The best bet is to run utopia as a business, which is exactly what many communities concluded.

Finally, if you’re going to suppress your members’ worldly desires, you need a mechanism for self-selection. Several religious sects, like the Old Order Amish, have successfully stifled material interests over multiple generations. Their people are happy because they don’t require much stuff. But they know that everyone can’t be kept in the fold. Anabaptist communities who believe that only adults can be meaningfully baptized provide this safety valve. The 10% of Amish who don’t stay allow the other 90% to maintain their culture.

While many people believe that utopias are doomed to failure because of human nature, it’s much more useful to approach utopia as the ultimate governance challenge. The U.S., itself, was a far more successful experiment because of that approach, expressed in James Madison’s view that, “If men were angels, no government would be necessary.”

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# The Amish Way of Life (#2)

Horse-drawn buggies clattering down rural lanes, men sporting suspenders and broad-brimmed straw hats, women clad in simple homemade dresses and modest bonnets, tables groaning under a bounty of fresh-from-the-farm food. From a distance, our view of Northern Indiana’s 20,000-plus Amish is a postcard view of serenely simple life.

Of course, we know better. Amish daily life is as complex as ours—led by constantly evolving rules rooted in Switzerland’s 16th century Anabaptist movement.

### Amish & Mennonite History

The Amish and Mennonite groups emerged from the Anabaptist movement during the 16th-century Protestant Reformation in Central and Western Europe. To escape persecution, the Dutch Anabaptist leader and former Catholic priest Menno Simons gathered his followers and fled to Switzerland, where the Mennonite group was established. By the end of the 17th century, a group led by Jakob Amman split from the Swiss Mennonite group and was named Amish after its leader.

Attracted by the promise of religious freedom, the Amish began migrating to Pennsylvania in the early 1700s. Amish residents, who first settled in this area near Middlebury in 1841, are descendants of the Swiss Amish from Pennsylvania. For more information visit [www.mennohof.org](http://www.mennohof.org" \o "Visit Mennohof.org" \t "_blank)

### The Amish Lifestyle

**Simplicity, a Way of Life** — A faith that dictates foregoing modern amenities, including electricity, automobiles and telephones, guides the Amish. This simple way of life is derived from teachings in the Bible and the Amish desire for an autonomous community.

**Military Service** — Following the biblical teaching of “love thy neighbor,” the Amish faith forbids violence and active military service.

**Amish and Mennonite** — As offshoots of the Anabaptist faith, the Amish and Mennonite groups are closely related. In general, Mennonites condone a more liberal lifestyle, which includes some modern amenities such as electricity and automobiles.

**Amish Attire** — The Amish dress simply with only basic ornamentation. Men’s trousers use buttons rather than zippers. Amish women sew their family’s clothing from solid-color fabric, often in shades of blue. Young girls can wear pastel-colored dresses and, like Amish women, wear bonnets. Adult men can grow beards, but no mustaches (a centuries-old prohibition traced to mustached men in the European military). Only married Amish women wear aprons, and they can wear white aprons for church services.

**Photography** — All forms and methods of photography are strictly forbidden. The Amish can’t pose for photographs nor use cameras to capture images. The Amish believe photographs lead to pride, which threatens the importance of the “community” by emphasizing individualism and calling attention to individuals.

**Education** — Formal education ends with the eighth grade. After that, Amish boys begin an apprenticeship to learn a trade; girls learn the skills necessary to maintain a home.

**Work** — The Amish are adept farmers, and the majority of Northern Indiana’s Amish live on farms. Today, however, few Amish men are full-time farmers. To support their large families, most work in factories, artisan workshops or cottage businesses. Adolescent Amish girls and women often work in retail businesses or restaurants.

**Home and Family** — The home is the center of Amish life. Amish families host every event and gathering in their homes, from church services to funerals and weddings. Generally, Amish homes are uncluttered and furnished simply. Amish women take pride in their housekeeping, cooking and providing clothes and the staples of everyday life for their families. Many Amish homes include additions or small detached dwellings called dawdy houses, where family members such as grandparents live. In summer and fall, bountiful vegetable and flower gardens add splashes of color to the usually white buildings on Amish farmsteads.

**Courtship and Marriage** — When Amish boys turn 16, they receive a courting buggy for transportation to chaperoned social gatherings, where courtships often begin. During courtship, Amish boys escort eligible girls to church services, singing programs and other Amish events. Couples marry for life, and weddings often are major celebrations, including up to 500 guests. The Amish wedding day begins at 9 a.m. with the singing of hymns. A full sermon and the exchange of marriage vows follow. The wedding day concludes with a huge potluck meal.

**Taxes and Insurance** — The Amish pay state, federal and county taxes. Typically, they refuse Social Security benefits. Their faith dictates that the Amish community cares for its elderly. This self-supporting principle also eliminates the need for health insurance.

**Healthcare** — While Amish families often try alternative treatments, they will seek the services of doctors and modern hospitals when necessary.

**Population Trends** — Northern Indiana’s Amish population doubles about every 20 years, primarily due to the large size of Amish families, which often include 10 or more children.

# 4 Utopian Communities That Didn't Pan Out (# 3)

Every once in a while, a proud little community will sprout up just to let the world know how Utopia should be run. With chins raised almost as high as ideals, the community marches forth to be an example of perfection. But in most cases, all that harmonious marching gets tripped up pretty quickly. Here are four "perfect" communities that whizzed and sputtered thanks to human nature.

#### 1. Brook Farm (or, Ripley's Follow Me or Not)

Perhaps the best-known utopian community in America, Brook Farm was founded in 1841 in West Roxbury, Massachusetts, by George and Sophia Ripley. The commune was built on a 200-acre farm with four buildings and centered on the ideals of radical social reform and self-reliance. For free tuition in the community school and one year's worth of room and board, the residents were asked to complete 300 days of labor by either farming, working in the manufacturing shops, performing domestic chores or grounds maintenance, or planning the community's recreation projects. The community prospered in 1842"“1843 and was visited by numerous dignitaries and utopian writers.

**However, Ripley joined the unpopular Fourierism movement, which meant that soon the young people (out of a "sense of honor") had to do all the dirty work like repairing roads, cleaning stables, and slaughtering the animals.** This caused many residents, especially the younger ones, to leave. Things went downhill from there. The community was hit by an outbreak of smallpox followed by fire and finally collapsed in 1847.

#### 2. Fruitlands: A Utopian Community (for Six Months Anyway)

After visiting Brook Farm and finding it almost too worldly by their standards, Bronson Alcott (the father of Louisa May) and Charles Lane founded the Fruitlands Commune in June 1843, in Harvard, Massachusetts.

Structured around the British reformist model, the commune's members were against the ownership of property, were political anarchists, believed in free love, and were vegetarians. **The group of 11 adults and a small number of children were forbidden to eat meat or use any animal products such as honey, wool, beeswax, or manure. They were also not allowed to use animals for labor and only planted produce that grew up out of the soil so as not to disturb worms and other organisms living in the soil.**

Many in the group of residents saw manual labor as spiritually inhibiting and soon it became evident that the commune could not provide enough food to sustain its members. The strict diet of grains and fruits left many in the group malnourished and sick. Given this situation, many of the members left and the community collapsed in January 1844.

#### 3. The Shakers

Officially known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, the Shakers were founded in Manchester, England, in 1747. As a group of dissenting Quakers under the charismatic leadership of Mother Ann Lee, the Shakers came to America in 1774.

Like most reformist movements of the time, the Shakers were agriculturally based, and believed in common ownership of all property and the confession of sins. Unlike most of the other groups, the Shakers practiced celibacy, or the lack of procreation. Membership came via converts or by adopting children. Shaker families consisted of "brothers" and "sisters" who lived in gender-segregated communal homes of up to 100 individuals. **During the required Sunday community meetings it was not uncommon for members to break into a spontaneous dance, thus giving them the Shaker label.**

As pacifists they were exempted from military service and became the United States' first conscientious objectors during the Civil War. Currently, however, there isn't a whole lot of Shaking going on. As the younger members left the community, converts quit coming, and the older ones died off, many of the communities were forced to close. Of the original 19 communities, most had closed by the early 1900s.

#### 4. Pullman's Capitalist Utopia

Located 15 miles south of Chicago, the town of Pullman was founded in the 1880s by George Pullman (of luxury railway car fame) as a utopian community based on the notion that capitalism was the best way to meet all material and spiritual needs. **According to Pullman's creed, the community was built to provide Pullman's employees with a place where they could exercise proper moral values and where each resident had to adhere to the strict tenets of capitalism under the direction and leadership of Pullman.** The community was run on a for-profit basis—the town had to return a profit of 7% annually. This was done by giving the employees two paychecks, one for rent, which was automatically turned back in to Pullman, and one for everything else. Interestingly, the utopian community had very rigid social class barriers, with the management and skilled workers living in stately homes and the unskilled laborers living in tenements. The experiment lasted longer than many of the other settlements, but ultimately failed. Pullman began demanding more and more rent to offset company losses, while union sentiment grew among the employee residents.

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# Want To Escape The Modern World? 9 'Utopias' That Really Exist (#4)

The Huffington Post  |  By [Carolyn Gregoire](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/carolyn-gregoire/)

The idea of the "utopian" community has a long, storied history (and a largely unsuccessful one at that), from the fictional island dreamed up by Sir Thomas More to present-day attempts to build the perfect urban ecosystem. And even though the perfect society has eluded us, that hasn’t stopped people from trying. Seekers attempting to leave behind the conventions and restrictions of traditional society have created self-sustaining communities ranging from groups of tofu-making hippies in rural Virginia to expatriates living in treehouses in the Costa Rican rainforest (and yes, there is a community called Yogaville).

"The criticism of utopia is that it’s impossible to achieve perfection, so why try?" J.C. Hallman, author of "In Utopia," [told Salon in 2010](http://www.salon.com/2010/08/15/in_utopia_interview/" \t "_hplink). "But the impossibility of perfection does not absolve us from the path of pursuing a more perfect union."

Is it just cities people are trying to escape? Fed up with society as it is? **Check out these nine fascinating case studies in alternative modes of living, spanning from the Arizona Desert to the Korean coast.**

**The Farm, Lewis County, Tennessee**

In 1971, a group of 300 flower children and free-thinkers left San Francisco to blaze a trail out east, settling in rural Tennessee to become the founders of what is now America's oldest hippie commune.

[The Farm](http://www.thefarmcommunity.com/" \t "_hplink), located just outside Summertown, Tennessee, is still around to this day, and was the subject of the 2012 documentary "American Commune." Now composed of roughly 200 members, the vegetarian intentional community was founded on -- and still lives by -- their core values of nonviolence and respect for the environment.

**Green Bank, West Virginia**

Green Bank, West Virginia is a safe haven away from the reach of technology where the "electrosensitive" can come to escape the digital world. The small town is located in a U.S. National Radio Quiet Zone, a 13,000–square-mile area where electromagnetic radiation (yes, that includes WiFi and cell phone signals) is banned so as not to disturb the National Radio Astronomy Observatory. About 150 people have moved to Green Bank and created a community for the precise purpose of escaping radiation, which they believe is harmful to their health.

“Life isn’t perfect here. There’s no grocery store, no restaurants, no hospital nearby,” [a resident of the town recently told Slate](http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/future_tense/2013/04/green_bank_w_v_where_the_electrosensitive_can_escape_the_modern_world.single.html" \t "_hplink). “But here, at least, I'm healthy. I can do things. I'm not in bed with a headache all the time.”

**Arcosanti, Arizona**

The "urban laboratory" that is Arcosanti was first created in the 1970s in the Arizona desert 70 miles north of Phoenix as a social experiment of sorts, and it's still standing to this day. Citizens of Arcosanti collaborate in creating and selling their signature product, ceramic and bronze wind bells, [according to The New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com/slideshow/2012/02/16/garden/20120216-ARCOSANTI-2.html" \t "_hplink).

The roughly 50 inhabitants of the community ("arconauts") continue living out founder Paolo Soleri's idea of "arcology" -- architecture fused with ecology.

**Finca Bellavista Sustainable Treehouse Community, Costa Rica**

Finca Bellavista is probably the closest that real life can get to Swiss Family Robinson. The sustainable treehouse community is comprised of more than 25 elevated structures, as well as a base camp community center, located deep in the Costa Rica rainforest more than a mile and a half from the nearest town. Its typical resident is a laid-back, environmentally conscious American expatriate, [according to founders Erica and Matt Hogan](http://www.businessinsider.com/finca-bellavista-2012-7?op=1" \t "_hplink), who started building Finca in 2006.

"In general, people [who live here] want a simpler lifestyle," [Hogan told Business Insider](http://www.businessinsider.com/finca-bellavista-2012-7?op=1" \t "_hplink). "They want a life less ordinary. They're usually very green, environmentally-conscious and want to live off the grid."

**Twin Oaks, Virginia**

Founded in 1967, the intentional community of Twin Oaks is one of the most successful of that era. The small commune is situated on 450 acres of land in Louisa, Virginia and is famous for its tofu. Approximately 100 residents live in the community now, which consists of seven group houses along with a gathering area, swimming hole, graveyard, soy production facility, several greenhouses, and more.

"Of the thousands of similar communal experiments forged throughout the ’60s and ’70s, Twin Oaks is one of only a handful to have survived," [Cluster Magazine wrote in a recent profile](http://theclustermag.com/2013/04/working-in-a-moneyless-world-2/" \t "_hplink), "as other utopian experiments collapsed under the pressure of self-sustainability and interpersonal drama."

**New Songdo City, Korea**

Whereas most of these communities are a throwback to a simpler time, New Songdo City on the South Korean coast is an ambitious new community project that couldn't be more futuristic-looking. Scheduled for completion in 2015, New Songdon will be located on Incheon Bay, and will include city-wide WiFi integration and will be highly environmentally friendly. The city will be built from scratch, like Dubai or Abu Dhabi.

"They’re promising full technological integration," Hallman [told Salon](http://www.salon.com/2010/08/15/in_utopia_interview/" \t "_hplink). "Lamps and tables and cars and everything will be computerized and on a network. You won’t even need a BlackBerry or a laptop."

**Yogaville, Buckingham, Virginia**

Virginia's [Satchidananda Ashram](http://www.yogaville.org/about-us/yogaville/" \t "_hplink) and the surrounding community is known as Yogaville, a space where people of diverse backgrounds have come together to live the yogic lifestyle. The holistic community was founded by Sri Swami Satchidananda, a spiritual leader who aspired to share his message of peace with like-minded others.

As the community's website [describes itself](http://www.yogaville.org/about-us/yogaville/" \l "sthash.207ohcuc.dpuf" \t "_hplink), "We came from various places. We have various tastes, various temperaments, various faces, various beliefs, but we are living here as one family, helping each other."

**The Ecovillage at Ithaca, New York**

Created in 1996, [Ithaca's Ecovillage](http://ecovillageithaca.org/evi/index.php/about/about" \t "_hplink) is a sustainable intentional community and education center which describes itself as an "alternative model for suburban living which provides a satisfying, healthy, socially rich lifestyle, while minimizing ecological impact." It currently has two 30-home co-housing neighborhoods, named "Frog" and "Song," with plans to build a third (the forthcoming "Tree"), as well as community gardens and organic farms.

**Polestar Yoga Community, Big Island, Hawaii**

A cooperative yoga and meditation community located on Hawaii's Big Island around 30 miles south of the city of Hilo, Polestar was founded on the teachings of Paramhansa Yogananda, author of the best-selling 1946 spiritual manifesto ["Autobiography of a Yogi."](http://www.amazon.com/Autobiography-Yogi-Complete-Paramahansa-Yogananda/dp/0876120796" \t "_hplink) The community lives by its core value of karma yoga (selfless service) and [essential purpose](http://www.polestargardens.org/visionMission.php" \t "_hplink) of "deepening the spirit."

Polestar consists of a small core community of permanent residents, but also welcomes guests to visit and stay on its 20 beautiful acres, enjoying the yoga temple, spiritual library, orchards and organic gardens. One guest [described](http://www.polestargardens.org/RetreatsHawaiiYoga.php" \t "_hplink) it as "a strong environment for spiritual transformation."